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English Poetry

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SHEPPARD & HUGHES
MANCHESTER
1902

THE PERMANENT POWER OF
ENGLISH POETRY

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AT a time when our commemoration of the first great English king is still fresh in memory, it is scarcely unseasonable to take a text from two old English poems which Alfred may have read; the less so, since in their case a 'millennium' is not altogether that vivid reminder of the abysmal changes which thirty generations bring about in the civil and political life of a great people, which when all is said it is in his; but rather a new illustration of the fact, that in some deep and significant, as well as in some elementary and commonplace, things, the remote time is in touch with the present, and 'a thousand years' in truth but 'as yesterday when it is past.' Whoever takes up the old lays picturesquely entitled by modern editors the 'Wanderer' and the 'Seafarer' must feel in them something of the same strange, half-pathetic interest that belongs, for each of us, to the unconsciously prophetic scribblings of our own childhood. In the 'Seafarer' we hear a young man discourse with an old. The young man already breathes the *Wanderlust* of the Elizabethans, their joyous eagerness to taste the perils of the sea, and achieve something worthy of note before they are called across the wider sea from which no traveller returns:

'The woods are in bloom (he cries), the hamlets grow
fair,
The meadows are gay, the world is alive :
They are all calling the youth of spirit
Forth on his way, whoever meaneth
To wander afar on the paths of ocean.

For the best renown to be won by a man
 On the lips of the after-world is this :
 That ere he went hence he manfully strove
 By deeds of valour with fellness of foes.'

The hero of the *Wanderer*, like the 'old man' in the *Seafarer*, lacks this zest of adventure, but he has other qualities as fine, and as significant for the future. Solitary amid the wintry waters of the Northern seas, he succumbs to sorrow and sleep ; and in his dreams sees the beloved lord in whose hall he sat, and seems to embrace him, and kiss him, and lay his head and hand on his knee, as he had done of old. Then he starts up, and sees the gray waves breaking drearily as before, and the sea birds dipping and darting around, heedless as ever that man is 'full of care.' Then he longs the more bitterly for his dear ones ; the memory of his kindred courses thro' his heart, he greets them with joy and eagerly scans them, but the phantom faces float again away ; and of the old familiar words but few they utter !

We easily recognise in such passages as this, the passion for the home, for the kindred, which has lived in heroic breasts at all times beside the passion of adventure ;—the two sometimes making terms with each other as best they can, sometimes harmoniously fused, as in Wordsworth's 'Happy Warrior,' who, though

‘endued as with a sense
 And faculty for storm and turbulence,
 Is yet a soul whose master-bias leans
 To home-felt pleasures and to gentle scenes.’

In poetry, too, we can distinguish the counterparts of these passions. There is the poetry of the *wing*, which soars and roves, and the poetry of the *foot*, which grasps and holds. In a somewhat different sense from Plato's, we may ascribe 'the power of the wing' to the poetry which seemingly emancipates

itself from reality to wander in regions of visionary beauty or strangeness ; while the ‘ strength of the foot,’ in a sense different from Ruskin’s, belongs to the poetry which lays hold, primarily, of the fact, of the common stuff of experience, of the concrete thing. No poetry worthy of the name is without some degree of both qualities. Perhaps it may appear that part of the permanent worth of the poetry of the English race lies in the frequent possessing of both in a high degree ; so that it has reached extraordinary heights of romance without losing touch with earth, and moved securely upon the surface of common things without ceasing to be inspired.

I.

No modern literature can compare, in serene perfection of attainment, with the Greek. But, as in the realm of ethics, so in the realm of art, the harmony at which we wonder was facilitated by limitations partly inevitable. As the high individual culture of the Athenian citizen was founded upon the labour of slaves, so the harmonious grace of his poetry was won by rejecting from its habitual province whole spheres of life. Beauty was won by eliminating the uncomely things, not by winning them into the sphere of art. An ideal image of the world was gained by ignoring that part of the world which does not lend itself to ideality. In the drama no vast ethical gulf yawns between the antagonists. Prometheus and Zeus, Orestes and the Eumenides, Antigone and Creon, are mighty opposites, but each stands for a principle, each is battling, in his own eyes, for right, each is carrying out some element of the moral ideal. Aristotle refused to admit the perfect villain as a subject of tragedy. Greek tragedy was the completest artistic expression of a people whose ethical thinking starts from the conviction that no man willingly does wrong, that evil-doing is a form of ignorance ;—an analysis

unsatisfactory not only to the worldly conscience, which testifies with Ovid that we often know the better and do the worse, but also to the deeper modern mind, which feels with a Hebraic intensity unknown to the Greeks the evil of evil, the sinfulness of sin.

Hebraic we have come to call this intense ethical conviction, and it is certainly the fundamental inspiration of Hebrew poetry. ‘Hebraism’ is not altogether favourable to poetry ; it runs easily into an ascetic Puritanism which revolts against the loftier joys of a poet as well as against his more sensuous luxuries of image and song. It makes against all deliberate structure and elaborated form ; its poetry sweeps us along in a rustling wind of lyric indignation, it does not put on the semblance of life in ordered organisms of epic and drama. It gives the poet at once his problem and his opportunity by laying bare before him black abysses of evil through which he has to find his way. Yet while it discourages an easy optimism, it lends a note of sublimer joys to the triumph of a valiant faith. So that poets less than a Dante or a Milton, confronted with the world-warfare of good and evil, have reached that note of sublime assurance which came from Hebrew and Greek alike in the great crises of national peril ;—whether it rested on faith in a great divine champion :

‘Then they called on the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses,’

or whether it rested on faith that duty is more than death,—as in the great epitaph of Simonides upon those who fell at Thermopylae :

‘Wayfarer, tell the Spartans that we died doing their bidding.’

At all times and among all peoples, when a man turns, in the midst of need and stress, to calm reflection, and utters it, there is, as Hegel finely says, an approach to poetry ; and

Hebraism, by as it were canonising and consecrating that mood which looks from the transient to the permanent relations of things, has made that approach to poetry more accessible and more frequented. Sometimes the vision of things in their eternal relations has overpowered the vision of their transient ones; sometimes it lifts these into a higher and more eloquent lustre, as the meanness and squalor of Jewish poverty are lifted into grace by the coming of the Princess Sabbath, when

‘every Friday evening,
In the twilight, suddenly,
The charm is broken, and the dog
Grows anew a human creature.’

In Christian times the Hebrew poet has always been more prone to the rapt, averted than to the open, irradiating, gaze : to a poetry of wistful romance, not of lofty realism. Far-off Jerusalem, ruined and desolate, dominates the dreams of Jehuda ben Halevy, and his pearls of poetry are like those *Thränenperlen* wept over the fall of Jerusalem,—pearls which, as Heine sings, strung upon the golden thread of rhyme, became that famous song which is sung in all the scattered tents of Jacob, the world over, on the anniversary of its destruction. It is only when the Hebraic passion for goodness has been fused with classic inspiration of poetry, that this rapt, averted gaze becomes the piercing scrutiny of the life near by, such as we find in Dante. Of him, yet more truly than of Milton, it could be said that he passed the flaming walls of space and time—*flammatia moenia mundi*—not ‘the secrets of the abyss to spy,’ but to lay bare the more momentous secrets of the heart of man.

But Dante’s Hebraic intensity was moulded by the art of Rome,—the third of the ancient nations whose literary bequest was of capital moment for modern poetry. Virgil, his master

and fountain head, was the most national, as well as the greatest of Roman poets,—the loftiest embodiment of the mind and ideal of Rome at the height of her power. He was the first European poet of the Empire; the first who uttered the proud self-consciousness of a ruling race. No other Roman poet found so mighty a disciple as Virgil found in Dante; but almost all Roman poetry which counted in the making of Europe bore, like Virgil's, the imperial stamp; it breathes the stir and stress, the refinement and affectation, the magnificence and the squalor, the weariness and the satiety, of a great world-city. Satire always claimed to be of Roman birth; certainly in the hands of Horace it became an instrument of urbane and ironical castigation, and in the hands of Juvenal a weapon of invective, which the genius of the Roman state might seem to have shaped for itself, and which every modern polity as it reached the civic maturity and the urban corruption of Rome, has sought to wield. But even its derivative poetical forms acquired, in the Roman world, a metropolitan flavour. The blithe open-air pastoral of Theocritus, full of the blaze and perfume of the Sicilian noontide, became the Virgilian Eclogue, with its literary shepherds and its uncertain scenery, touched with the sentiment of a poet inured, like Theocritus, to court and city, but far more inwardly mastered by their spell. And the luxuriant myth-lore of Greece and Rome, when the warm vitality had almost left it, acquired the immortality of art in the brilliant mosaics of Ovid,—exempt thenceforth from the decay which befalls every legendary faith, but also desiccated of all that gives a faith hold upon the blood, and of all that betrays the naïve instinctive fancy whence it sprang. Thus upon the mythic tale, as upon the rustic shepherd and the rustic satirist, Roman poetry wrought a transformation into something sumptuous, superb, and brilliant, but hard,—the wild acanthus culled from its shy haunts along the forest glades to flash in marble from Corinthian capitals for the adornment of the Roman Forum, where

the ways of all the world met, and the ends of the earth came together.

II.

For many centuries, as we know, the influence of the whole ancient world, Greek, Hebrew, or Roman, in literature, was communicated through the medium of the metropolitan and, in the strict sense, secular atmosphere of Rome. For Homer, there were Dares and Dictys, for the Hebraism of early Christianity the Vulgate and the metropolitan church of Peter. Hardly before Herder gathered the treasures of old Hebrew song, hardly before Goethe and Byron and Shelley, in their several ways, rediscovered the Prometheus-legend, did Greek or Hebraic poetry count among the forces making for the elemental, the *urspringlich*, in humanity, not for its complex culture and civilised convention. In the poetic, as in the political, world the dream of the Roman empire lingered, an ineluctable memory, a presence not to be put by, mingling with and transforming the traditional poetry as well as the traditional polity of the Germanic tribes, turning the Frankish king into an emperor of Rome and building upon the basis of his exploits against Saxon and Saracen cycles of epic lays, significantly called 'romances' and '*chansons de geste*',—the imagined record of the *res gestae* of a new Roman people. The hero of romance is a last reverberation of Roman heroism; the germ of the romantic world is the fable, the legend, of Rome. In its most magnificent form the dream of Rome took shape in the great work of Dante, for whom the empire of Cæsar was the temporal fabric divinely appointed to receive the Church of Christ, guarded by miraculous intervention from the ruin threatened by the Gaul and by Hannibal, and destined, as he thought, to save his distracted country from the evil rule of that Church itself. Yet the legend of Rome which he so prominently pursued was the least vital element

of his work, hardly more vital than the legendary Rome of the romances. The imperialism of Virgil imposes still ; it ran in the blood of his race ; it was not his personal creed, but one, if I may adapt Matthew Arnold's famous phrase, which History wrote with her sheer and penetrating power upon his page. But Dante's imperialism was a phantom, passionately clasped but ever eluding him, like the shade of Anchises. It was not that way that the genius of modern poetry beckoned.

'How comes it, Dante,' cries the greatest of living Italian poets, Carducci, in his eloquent sonnet,—' How comes it that I lift adoring vows and tongue to thy haughty image, and bend over the verse by which thou wast once outworn, and see the sun go down and again the young dawn rise? I hate thy 'Holy Empire'; and I would have plucked the crown with my sword from the brows of thy good Frederick. Church and empire are become a mournful wreck ; but over these soars thy song, and rings this message to heaven : 'Jove passes, and the poet's hymn abides.''*

It was, then, from other sources than the memory of Rome, however heightened by romance, that the true greatness of modern poetry was to spring. Italy, Spain, France, Germany, England, and the Celtic fringe of Ireland and Wales, have each developed some special insight or some special skill, have made some province of poetry peculiarly their own, beside the broad domain which the whole Western world, as compared with India or Persia, cultivates in common. Italy, which had listened with but half an ear to the romances of chivalry, won her highest triumphs in poetry by touching the spirit of chivalry to finer issues ; transfixing its exalted love with the wonderful imagery and melody of Petrarch, or gaily travestyng its prodigal heroics with the radiant wit and laughter of Ariosto. Even Dante's stupendous work has its roots in a Troubadour's love-song : it is the maiden adoration of the *Vita Nuova* expanded and articulated into a passionate apprehension of the

* G. Carducci : *Rime Nuove*.

divinely animated Cosmos in all its concrete infinity of good and evil, of love and hatred, of laughter and tears. But even Dante suggests the point at which Italian poetry must be held to have always fallen short : in the ideal imitation of a great human action in epic or drama. The Divine Comedy has no *plot* ; Dante himself passes on through scenes of ever-varying circumstance and complexion, rich in incidental drama and pathos ; but their succession is determined by no human will or passion,—by no indignant Achilles, by no vengeful Satan,—but by the rigid and inflexible order of the universe through which he makes his way. The dynamics of his poem are derived not from humanity, but from dogma. To epic action Ariosto hardly made pretence ; and Tasso, who did, produced, when all is said, not so much an epic as a beautiful romance garnished with epic machinery. And Italian drama has, with rare exceptions, crossed the bounds of prose only to fall into the Scylla of the frigidly antique or the Charybdis of the operatic, incapable of that ideal imitation of life which is more real than actuality and more poetic than romance.

III.

And something of this incapacity must be said, with all reserves, to attach, on the whole, to the poetic achievement of the other Romance peoples. How vast the debt of European culture is to the accomplished singers of mediæval France need not be told : but their greatest services to literature lay in providing picturesque material to which poets of more virile faculty elsewhere communicated the breath of life. The melodies of Provence wakened the spirit of Dante ; the busy versifiers of Troyes prepared the way for a Wolfram, a Benoit for a Boccaccio, a Jean de Meung for a Chaucer. With all their fascinating and unfailing grace the early French romancers rarely caught the finer breath of

romance. On the other hand, their realism was the realism of the *esprit gaulois*,—gay, malicious, intelligent, full of verve and wit, but fastening with zest on weakness and folly, indifferent to beauty, incredulous of virtue, fundamentally hostile to romance. For a moment the *esprit gaulois* appears in Villon, invested in that lurid flame of poetry which cynicism, pushed to the furthest verge, will sometimes engender,—when the solid world becomes evanescent under the disintegrating eye, and death and decay acquire a haunting pathos from the merciless analysis which discerns them everywhere. A generation later, a mightier realist than Villon, with nothing of the cynic but his hatred of shams, poured forth in fantastic disguise the huge joy of life, the inexhaustible vitality of sense and thought, the riotous humour, which in an Aristophanes, in a Shakspere, found expression in poetic laughter. But Rabelais's laughter is not poetic, nor is Molière's,—and in these two the French spirit made its nearest approach to the wonderful realism of Shakspere. Nor, on the other hand, did the more choice and idealistic vein of French literature lead, for the present, to first-rate achievement in poetry. French classicism, under the guidance of Scaliger, tended to impoverish as well as to refine; and when all is said, the sublimity of Corneille and the pathetic beauty of Racine must be held to fall something short of full poetic vitality. They used, in their highest flights, a language almost nothing of which would have been impossible in prose; and up to the close of the 18th century there remained, as Gray noticed, no distinction between the French of prose and verse,—a most significant fact. But when Gray made that acute remark, the train was already laid for a wonderful expansion of the scope and horizon of French poetry, such as nothing in its history foretold. Rousseau is the true starting-point of this rejuvenescence. For our purpose, which is concerned with results, not with causes, it is needless to touch the history of that movement which, under the name of Romanticism, first

brought the French genius into vitalising contact with the well-springs of poetry which had begun to flow in Germany, England, in the North ; and then sent it back to recover the infinite treasures of speech-material which an academic fastidiousness had allowed to decay. From the days when Hugo led the *Cénacle* of 1827 and defied classicist Paris with *Cromwell* and *Hernani*, until to-day, French poetry has held its own, on at least equal terms, with the poetry of England, Germany, and America ; and many persons who do not echo the dithyrambs of Mr. Swinburne hold Hugo himself to have been, since the death of Goethe, the first of European poets. It may be said at least that the French contribution to the world's poetry appears concentrated and focussed in Hugo. What Musset, Gautier, Prud'homme and the rest, have done, then or since, is included broadly speaking in the same circle of achievement, occupies particular provinces of the same broad domain. Obviously, as with all the greater poetry of the time, it is with lyrical, not epic or dramatic, genius that we here have to do. Hugo's dramas owe whatever effect they exerted or retain, to their lyric splendour ; his magnificent *Légende des Siècles*, under the semblance of a vast epic of humanity, is a sequence of symbolic chants,—utterances of the poet's vague but grandiose enthusiasms and animosities through mythic imagery. The range of Hugo's lyric is, in spite of the slender stock of ultimate ideas from which it springs, immense. The specific limitations of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats do not touch him ; Nature and Humanity, the common and the wonderful, Hellenism and Gothic, are equally vocal to him, and with the backward gaze of the Romantics which made the Schlegels and Tieck, Wordsworth and Coleridge, reactionaries in politics, he united the revolutionary passion of Byron. The *Châtiments* have no parallel in modern literature save the *Vision of Judgment*. But his wide susceptibility was strikingly defective at various points where theirs was strong.

Marvellously alive to all the sense-delights of the natural world, he was no lover of nature, like Wordsworth; she was a magazine of images and metaphors, which he rifled with the utmost skill, to weave them together in gorgeous phantasmasgorias of his own. Hence, while nothing can exceed the grandiose splendour of his landscape, it wants those unobtrusive flashes which Wordsworth, in a quiet phrase, so often conveys. More than any English Romantic he is emancipated from the bondage of the world he lives in, compels the tumult of nature's forms and lines to fall into the harmonies he imposes, to dance to the music of his rhythms, and polarise itself in his incessant antitheses. His fundamental inspirations, the vague, impassioned ideas about which all his imagery gathers and revolves, are drawn from humanity rather than from nature,—progress, compassion, duty, heroism, misery;—humanity rather than nature evokes in him the recognition of the mysterious, the divine; his radically anthropomorphic imagination obliterates the natural form with the human symbol. Like Shelley he is a great myth-maker; but Shelley's myth world has something of the naïveté of primeval nature worship; Hugo's is the voluptuous Olympus of a romantic Homer, alive with pageant and drama, with war and counsel, mingling the sublime and the grotesque, splendour and deformity, mystery and squalor, the spiritual and the bourgeois. It is worth while pausing a moment to compare the ways in which these two great myth-making imaginations of France and England bodied forth the visions which possessed and transported each.

The 'fated hour' arrives. The soul of the universe asserts its supremacy, in a sudden cataclysm, over tyranny and evil; the old gods fall, and man rises to his ideal height, emancipated from superstition and sin; the clashing discords melt into harmonious accord. In Shelley's imagination all this takes shape as a lyric drama in which earth and air and ocean, and moon and stars, break forth in song which seems only

to set to music their pulsing life, their melting colours, their undulating loveliness of profile, their bright evanescence of cloud and foam. Hugo's dream finds vent through a more astonishing though less beautiful symbolism. In the wonderful *Satyre* of the first *Légende des Siècles*, we remember how the faunlike Pan discourses to the listening gods of the beginning of the world, and the nascence and evolution of man. As his tale advances, he is gradually transformed. His shaggy deformity grows beautiful, they feel its charm ; don't look out at his eyes, they grow uneasy and bodeful. At last he prophesies their overthrow at the hands of that dark final god whom man calls 'No more!' "And as he spoke the Satyr became enormous ; greater first than Polyphebie, then greater than Typhon, then greater than Titan, and than Athos ; boundless space entered into his shadowy form ; he grew before their eyes as a promontory grows to the approaching sailor's ; upon his brow lay the pallor of a strange dawn ; his hair was a forest, the waves, rivers, lakes, rushed from his deep thighs ; his horns became peaks of Caucasus and Atlas ; thunders rolled about him with heavy crash ; plains and meadows trembled on his sides, and his protuberances grew mountains ; tigers and stags climbed along his face ; Aprils flowered along his limbs ; Decembers lurked in his armpits ; and wandering people asked their way forlorn in the palm of his hand ; eagles fought in the gaping mouth ; the lyre, became gigantic at his touch, sang, wept, murmured, thundered, shrieked ; hurricanes were entangled in its seven strings like flies in a cobweb ; his terrific breast was full of stars. He cried : "The future, as made by the heavens, is the escape into the boundless infinite, it is the spirit from all sides penetrating the *thing*. Make place for the divine atom, that is fire and dew, place for the radiation of the universal soul ! A king means war, and a god means night. Liberty, life and faith, on the ruins of dogma ! Everywhere one light, one genius everywhere ! Place for the All ! I am Pan ! Jupiter, to thy knees !"

This transformation, in its magnificence and its audacity, its sublimity trembling on the verge of the grotesque, fairly represents, if not the supreme achievement of French Romanticism, yet the qualities which distinguish the greatest Romantic poetry of France from that of Germany or of England. Here above all is the *Lyrisme*, the irresponsible Titanic fancy, building up the world and breaking it down at will, symptom of emancipated genius, joyously shaking off the classic bondage of centuries. Here the animalism and the spirituality tossed together, the satyr's gross body expanded into a universe which yet palpitates with harmony and love,—symptom of a national intellect which has oscillated, as no other, between the heights of idealism, the fulness of sense, between Villon and St. Louis, Rabelais and Pascal, Goncourt and Lamennais. In French Romanticism these two strands of the national life, till then severed, met and blended, with results of almost unequalled splendour for the imagination, however chaotically vague to the intellect. And through the tumultuous splendour of the unique organ of expression thus created there glowed that passion for humanity which no other people has so continuously felt or so energetically characterised and promoted; and which, if it cannot alone create its poetic instrument, yet, wherever it touches an instrument already tuned, wakens it more surely than any other passion to prophetic notes,—makes it the trumpet of a prophecy to unawakened earth.

IV.

It was from very different points of view, and under the stress of very different instincts, that the German people approached the problems of poetry. Alone among the peoples of the West, the Germanic tribesman never learned permanently the lesson of Rome, though his imagination never

ceased to be haunted by the Roman dream. A German king received the imperial crown, and for centuries the world saw the strange spectacle of a Roman empire, nominally the supreme temporal power in Europe, and wielded by Germans, but of which no part so little recalled the imperial Roman rule as Germany itself. The brilliant originality of the French mind has always tended to work along the lines which make for social cohesion and logical consistency ; the profounder and more complex originality of the German has continually borne him aloof into ideal particularities of his own, while still haunting him with the dream of harmony and wholeness. No people has felt so keenly the differences, ultimately unfathomable, among men ; the mysterious depths of character ; the regions of being which lie deeper than expression, deeper than consciousness. None has been checked by such persistent instincts of kinship and unity from accentuating individuality into isolation. The Leibnitzean monad, with its resolute identity, was German ; so was Fichte's, with its all-embracing totality. Hence it was reserved for the Germanic peoples to express in their poetry the individuality of character, which the Greeks had cared to seize only under broad outlines, and to recur again and again, with the fascination of inborn sympathy and racial experience, to those conflicts of character with itself, from which the Greeks had on the whole turned away, and which, in the poetry of the Romance peoples present themselves mainly in the more superficial form of a debate between contending motives in the forum of the intellect. In Germanic poetry character is apt to be less easily interpretable to intelligence ; after all analysis has done its work, insoluble residua are left ; forces are felt struggling for the mastery, and obscurely moulding conduct and colouring speech before they become explicit in consciousness ; character, in short, has a history, and its end is shadowed in its first beginnings, its first beginnings in its end : Parzival through the naive errors of the 'fool' gradually works out the wisdom

of the pure-in-heart ; Wilhelm Meister, seeking his father's asses, finds at last his kingdom ; Faust, led by the spirit which denies through the pleasures which destroy, emancipates himself by the energy which creates and affirms. Development of character is a field of literature which has been cultivated more brilliantly elsewhere, but nowhere so consciously and ardently as in Germany. In general we may say that the Greek conception of organic growth, which the scientific and philosophic intellect of Germany did so much to elaborate and expound, has been, from Goethe onwards, and in Goethe pre-eminently, an *idée mère* of German poetry. The idea of an organism, where each part is vital and shares in and contributes to the vitality of the whole, that seemed to reconcile those two conflicting instincts of individualism and community before which German intellect through its whole history had oscillated. It provided an expressive formula for the strength and the limitations of the poetry which centres in Goethe. Bold and rapid movement, energetic action, whatever detaches and isolates men from the community in which they live or the soil of which they are sprung, are alien to it : it has its moments of greatness even here, but they are gifts of fortune, not of nature. How poor is the action of *Faust* compared to its thought and passion ! On the other hand, with what exquisite instinct Goethe renders the life which draws directly from the community in which it moves and from the soil in which it springs ! Hermann and Dorothea may be called types, if we will ; but Goethe's types are never the abstractions denuded of individual colouring, which we associate with the term ; they are individuals in whom all that is characteristic and expressive in the race, all that recalls its history, or foreshadows its future, bears the stamp of its habits or its haunts, meet together in one luminous point. Hermann and Dorothea are such luminous points, in which the life history of an endless vista of German manhood and womanhood may be read. All the business of life comes into the

story, quite naturally ; we discuss the whole economy of the little country-town,—we get to know how it lives, we see its orchards, gardens, vineyards, and reckon their yield. Here was, once more, a true *epos*, where, to recall Hegel's phrase once more, 'everything that a nation is in deed finds utterance.'

Goethe's wonderful epic feeling for the springs of *story* had its counterpart, as we know, in a not less wonderful lyric feeling for the springs of *song*. And here he was only the most perfect of a throng of singers whose collective song is not to be matched by the *Volkslied* of any other people. Of the German *Volkslied*, as it lives on all German lips to-day, a great part is of known origin ; the work of accomplished and famous poets,—Heine, Lenau, Storm, Goethe. But they all sang with the music of an immemorial tradition of impersonal *Volkslied* ringing in their ears, and set their first notes with sympathetic instinct in tune to its vibrations. In intense utterance of the cry of passion the German *Volkslied* at its best does not surpass the greatest songs of Burns ; but it utters it through a far wider range of mood and key ; and the emotions which gather about myth and folklore are expressed with a simple intensity only to be paralleled in the finest Scandinavian ballads. How poor is the supernatural part of Tam o' Shanter beside *Erlkönig* ! On the other hand, neither in the *Volkslied* nor elsewhere has German poetry excelled in the *creation* of myth, in the bold and free imagination of a Hugo or a Shelley. Faust and Mephisto, and the spectres of the Brocken, arrest us yet ; but a deadly chill has fallen upon the symbolic population of the Second Part, brilliant as the rhetoric is with which they are furnished forth ; and even Prometheus and Pandora are mortal beside Hermann and Dorothea. The province of Germany in poetry is in a peculiar sense that which German æsthetic theory has been apt to define as the province of poetry at large,—to express the ideal consciousness of the people ;—not the towering fabrics of romantic fancy, but the

native growth of heath and forest, wild flowers of song, whose most ethereal loveliness is fragrant of the soil, and here and there some more massive trunk of a *Faust*, in which the same strong sap of Germanic passion and idealism rises into spreading boughs that overshadow humanity.

It must suffice to mention in one word, finally, that Celtic poetry of legend and romance which has played a part still so indeterminate in the literature of Europe and of England. Here we have no longer to do with the literature of a great and organised polity, of a united nation, of a capital; hardly with an ethical ideal; the substratum of common legend which the Celt shared with other Aryan peoples he touched the issues of his own; emphasising whatever in it was romantic, dreamy, wistful, mysterious, withdrawing it further from prosaic actuality.

V.

We have thus passed in summary review the leading European developments of national poetry, apart from our own, to which by common consent some permanent power attaches. It is one of the most obvious, and not the least significant, distinction of English poetry to have stood, either by natural kinship, or by capacity of assimilation, in more or less close relation to them all. Almost every great English poet has manifested his Germanic kinship by some form of poetic realism; many have betrayed, or suggested, the Celtic by glamour of romance. The greatest of the Elizabethans, ignorant of Greek, evoked the purifying pity and terror of the Greeks from the vaster complex of modern life; the greatest of the Puritans wrought the sublime Hebraic warfare of God and Devil into a world-epic. Dryden, to a large extent, and Pope, in the main, were genuine Augustans; exponents of that hard, positive, unromantic, urban element of the English spirit which has made the Anglo-Saxons, in some sense, the

Romans of the modern world. At no period of English history has the positive strain been suppressed or obscured. Yet its presence has not prevented the high-wrought symbolism and delicate music of the Petrarchan sonnet from finding its most congenial home and haunt on English soil ; the revolutionary Romanticism of Hugo was inspired by Byron, heralded by Shelley ; and the legend of Celtic Arthur never ceased to haunt the imagination of English poets, as his name, a cloud wreath, clung to the mountain peaks of Britain, until it was enshrined in the 'enchanted reverie' of Tennyson.

In all these cases English poetry has shown, not mere imitative aptness, which is not a characteristic English or Germanic excellence at all, but some latent kinship of faculty. Nevertheless it is easy to see underlying this kinship a certain controlling bent which, in spite of all those various affinities, gives to English poetry, as a whole, something of the detachment, the insularity, which marks English nationality as a whole. Shakspere apart, how many of the voices which stir us most deeply waken no response on the continent, or are heard with half-comprehending good-nature as illustrations of our eccentric genius. Henri Beyle devoted an article to Milton in his *Dictionnaire* ; but it was to Milton the regicide and defender of the English people, a formidable pamphleteer who dabbled amiably in poetry in his leisure hours. Even Hegel, whose judgment of the *matter* of poetry is usually so penetrating, describes Milton as a praiseworthy example, for his age, of classical culture and elegant correctness of expression.* Chaucer, Spenser, Wordsworth, however high we may place them in the pantheon of the world's poetry, are deities of the tribe ; and the foreign and native critical judgments of Byron are to this day irreconcilably opposed. I am concerned here not with the qualities in English poetry which have most successfully overcome the impediments of alien blood and traditions, but with those

* Hegel: *Aesthetik*, 3, 416.

through which it has won most lasting hold upon minds naturally or by sympathetic culture accessible to it. To put the matter first in the most general and abstract terms, I find among the sources of this permanent power a capacity for what I may call waking vision,—for seeing with an eye at once imaginative and sane, romantic and alert, visionary and precise. The Greeks were masters here, Dante no less; no Englishman but Shakspere has this quality in supreme degree, with all that it implies. But English literature and biography are full of approximations to it from either side, as well as, what is equally significant, of excesses in either direction. Never for long, never without more or less violent reaction and recantation, has English poetry cut itself adrift from the world of common experience in which ordinary folks move, and which, denuded of the ideal affinities which to every seeing spirit it discloses, we call the world of prose. Chaucer laughing the insipid romances out of court, Shakspere putting to flight the pale elegiac heroines of Greene and Lodge with the radiant womanhood of Rosalind and Perdita; Jonson, indignantly summoning the audiences which had so long graced monsters, to see men; Pope, rejecting the arabesques of the school of Cowley in the name of Reason and common sense, Wordsworth repelling the glossy sentimentalities of the landscapists in the name of Nature as it is seen, and language as it is spoken; Browning proclaiming through the lips of the dying Paracelsus that the poet must know as well as love:—all these calls renewed, in changing accents, generation after generation, announced varying forms of the same common demand, not for *prose*, but for the poetry which shall take in and interpret that world of common experience of which prose is the mutilated abstraction, the bald epitome. For almost everyone of these proclaimers of Nature and realism does so take in and so interpret that world. English poetry has been in a certain sense republican, as became the poetry of the oldest commonwealth in Europe. The most imperious and

profound passion for poetry has not prompted, often or for long, those Hegiras to far-off Meccas of romance which have marked poetic enthusiasts elsewhere. Rousseau fled to the mountains from the world of convention in a mood of savage isolation quite unlike the quiet self-consecration to his life's work with which Wordsworth made his home among his native hills; the French and German Romantics fled to the studio from the world of prose, defying the profane and the philistine with long hair and eccentric waistcoats; Shelley, far from shutting himself up in those enchanted caverns of beauty which his fancy so prodigally bodied forth, was conspicuous for the quixotic heroism which impelled him to intervene, ignorant of fear, in the world of prose when any wrong was to be righted or any suffering to be relieved. 'Thou wouldest not be saved alone!' was Arnold's noble tribute to his father. And an instinct somewhat akin has continually withdrawn English poetry from the barren splendour of the Palace of Art. So that even in that Preraphaelite school which has most exalted the supremacy of art, the artist's passion for beauty has gone along with the deeper sense of its needfulness in all human life, and of the fellowship of all who labour, in the meanest craft, to create it. The poet has not abandoned his 'Palace of Art,' but he has turned it into a workshop. He would not be saved alone, and it was the saving of him that he would not.

With all its persistent recurrence to "Nature," however, English poetry has obviously not been as a whole, or largely, in the vulgar sense, realistic. On the contrary, no poetry in the world has soared to higher heavens of invention or burst into more silent seas of romance.

But, in an important sense, we may say that there are ladders to its heaven, and ships for its romantic seas. The weird sisters and Caliban, for all their unearthly remoteness, are more accessible to us than Hugo's Satyr and his three-eyed Jupiter. Coleridge's Mariner is burnt in upon

our imagination; for, however we may disbelieve his marvellous experiences, no question he has had them. The only way to faeryland is after all by the ladder of psychological truth; and if Shakspeare's supernaturalism and Coleridge's are more vital than that of Hoffmann or Fouqué, it is because the dim survivals of primeval instinct in our blood which make us respond to faery and to the mysteries of the sea are there more completely and sympathetically completed and fulfilled. So again, in the momentary romance of simile and imagery, English poetry has, together with a vast amount of what is daring and false, or true and tame, produced in scarcely paralleled degree those images which, amazingly fresh and novel, yet thrill us as only that can which strikes chords deep in our hearts and implicit in all our experience.

'But look, the morn in russet mantle clad,
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill.'

How irresistible is the breath of dawn communicated by these simple words! It is not morn alone who walks there, but we and the unnumbered generations before us whose feet have brushed the sparkling dew of the uplands as they watched the daily triumph of light over darkness, symbol of the help which comes from the hills, as light from the east.* In this kind of romance, so boldly individual and yet so universal in its appeal, so brilliant and yet so human, so adventurous and yet so homely, English poetry is peculiarly rich. It springs, one may say, from a coincidence of two lines of poetical feeling which in most of the other great poetry of modern Europe have run apart. The Romantic poetry of modern France is unsurpassed in faculty of expression, unequalled in that last development of it, the art of suggesting the un-

* The illustration and comment are suggested by a striking passage in Mr. Edmund Holmes' essay: 'What is Poetry' (1900).

expressed. But its brilliance is, like the brilliance of Rome, somewhat exotic, somewhat technical, somewhat derivative, wanting in that note of primeval affinities, in those tones which stir the faint affections, the shadowy recollections, which, if they are not the 'master-light of all our seeing' yet lie about the root of all our vision and all our passion.

In the tenacity of primeval instincts, on the other hand, lies as we saw much of the characteristic strength of Germany in poetry. In the direct lyric utterance of the simple emotions which never grow dim, of love which is born of the home and of which homes are born, of the simple tears and mirth of Mother Earth, she is incomparable. But German poetry is wanting in magic of expression. Together with the exuberant inventiveness of France, it lacks that subtle unreason of the imagination which pierces deeper than thought and sentiment and stirs inexplicably the hidden currents which vibrate in both. It is the characteristic power of the greatest English poetry to touch this region more intimately by a poetic speech more poetic, more hardy, more expansive, more impossible, more inevitable, on the whole, than any other. It is by virtue of that hold upon an ideal which lies in the blood that English poetry has been drawn so persistently and recurrently to what it has called Nature. Its ideal lay not beyond the horizon or beyond the sky, or before the beginning of things or beyond their end, but near by, in the world of things where primitive man found his fetish. From that world, whether the infinitely complex detail of human life as in Shakspere, or the breathing vitality of the meanest flower that blows, as in Wordsworth, it wrings forth the ideal world; in the pageant of drama, or in thoughts that lie too deep for tears; now climbing by the ladder of the impossible, now by the steeper ladder of the commonplace. Shakspere and Wordsworth I hold to be, not necessarily the two greatest of English poets, but the two whose work, utterly unlike as it seems to be, is most penetrated with that kind of power which I have ascribed, at its best, to

English poetry. Sanity and vision, the eye set on the thing, and the imagination which reads all humanity in a tale or in a flower, these were in them both; and the works of both, devoid of explicit morality or definable dogma, are permanent rallying-points of those benign forces of which morality and dogma are passing formulations. So, in a different sense, that simple dialogue of the Old Seafarer and the Young finds its solution, the springtime glory of adventure and the autumnal longing for return come together, and the poet, in a more spiritual sense than Wordsworth's Skylark, becomes true to the kindred points of heaven and love, by disclosing that they are the same.

